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ABSTRACT

Evidence is overwhelming that in spite of our rhetoric of equality of opportunity, American schools have endorsed and promoted the children of advantage and restrained and discouraged those of disadvantage. Our rhetoric of equality of opportunity, our American dream, is at stake. This concern is reflected fundamentally in the current national reports on education. At risk in the decline of America's schools is our leadership in technology and production, our economic prosperity, the loss of military security abroad, and the disintegration of civil and social order at home. The burden placed on the schools is staggering in that the health and well-being of the whole society seems to rest on their success or failure. The failure of our schools will mean the end of our vision of achieving the just society. Americans need to examine what a society such as ours means by a standard of excellence in schooling. We need to consider the social ideas that we hold for ourselves, the standard of equity that we have always maintained to be important to our society's well-being in relation to our ideas of excellence. Above all, American society must stem the tide of our retreat from equity. (RM)

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THE RETREAT FROM EQUITY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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The Retreat from Equity in American Education

America's schools since the founding of the Republic have been seen as essential for maintaining our government and society. The founders of the new nation, the revolutionary generation of Jefferson, Rush, Madison and the others, saw education as the necessary instrument for consolidating the revolution, for securing the new republic against counter-revolution, as well as for making workable the newly established democratic form of government. The colonial colleges, William and Mary, Harvard and the half dozen others were controlled by religious and political reactionaries, some even by royalists and Tories, who were fundamentally opposed to the new democratic social and political order. How could these colleges in Jefferson's view be left to influence and develop the generation of young minds who would become the new leadership of the Republic?

In the first decades of the new nation the struggle in education was to wrest control of higher education from the reactionary forces, the royalists and clerics, and to bring the colleges under democratically elected governing boards. The effort in time was thwarted by the courts in a final Supreme Court decision in 1819 known as the Dartmouth College case which upheld the original charter of the college and preserved continuing private control of such institutions. But in the intervening years Jefferson in Virginia as well as his confreres in the other states and in new states organizing in the West, began the effort to establish state controlled colleges and universities, to build a higher learning that would more directly reflect the will of a democratic people.

The other area of educational concern of the revolutionary generation was for schooling for the young of all the citizenry. Mass education at least to the level of literacy would be necessary to create a knowledgeable electorate, to secure the foundation of democratic government in the new Republic. Throughout the nineteenth century these efforts continued as new educational leaders in state after state took up the crusade for establishing free, tax-supported, compulsory public schooling. To maintain

America's democratic freedoms was a prime motive of these school reformers. And in the reports of "crisis" today there is a continuing reflection of this motive. From the Jeffersonian concern for the leadership of the nation through the nineteenth century reformers' claims that the schools will keep us free, the arguments are persuasive: failure of the schools, and indeed the public schools, poses a threat to the very roots of our democratic political system.

From the early years of the nation then the basic social and poltical order of our society seemed to depend on the working of the schools. Built in to the American system, framed in the documents declaring and founding the Republic, is the assurance that all us Americans are equal, yet with guarantees of rights and freedoms to advance ourselves as individual people and hence to become unequal. This nice paradox we have lived with comfortably and more or less successfully now for over 200 years. Through wars, bitter civil and international ones, through massive immigrations and internal shifts of populations, social and economic upheavals, religious and racial and ethnic strife, we have managed to maintain at least the rhetoric that every American is equal before the law, yet is assured the right through ability and hard work to rise in wealth and position above one's fellows. This paradox it should be said contained some blatant contradictions of caste within it from the beginning, such as black slavery or the non-citizenship of American Indians. The rhetoric however was always able to overlook these minority exceptions, as well as to ignore the economic and social deprivation of many other Americans. We have ardently wanted to believe, and we do today, that all Americans possess a basic equality of opportunity that permits any one of us to rise to a position of inequality in our society. How is it possible to maintain this belief in the face of so many contradictions and exceptions around us? How can we continue to hold that this dream of equality of opportunity could be reality? The school, the great American public school has always been our answer.

It is no less than the American dream at stake in our schools today. Our firm belief in the fairness of our system, that merit will be rewarded, that initiative and hard work will pay off. The inequalities that exist all around us, all too visible in the poor and the deprived of our society, are compatable with the dream because the opportunity to succeed is held out to every young person in the public systems of schools all across the nation. What could be more fair, more just than a society in which individual merit is rewarded and in which every child is guaranteed equal opportunity to develop whatever capacities for achievement in a free, tax-supported system of schooling. It is the American answer to Marxism. It is just and fair, we have argued, beyond any Marxist claims for state guaranteed equalities of opportunity. It seems to fit the American character in that the work ethic, the will to achieve on the part of the individual, is uppermost. The claim rests of course on the assumption that our systems of public schools do indeed offer to every child in every city and hamlet of the country an equal chance to achieve. Our rhetoric of equality of opportunity, our sense of justice and fairness in our society, our American dream is at stake in the effectiveness of our schools. It is that concern that is reflected fundamentally in the national reports on education today.

Evidence is overwhelming that in spite of our rhetoric of equality of opportunity American schools have endorsed and promoted the children of advantage, have restrained and discouraged those of disadvantage. The schools have sorted our the successes and the failures, and all too often the successes came from the "good" families, had the "right" skin color, spoke in the "proper" accents. The schools simply endorsed the majority values of the society and shunted aside the children of the poor, the black, the ethnic minorities. Yet the rhetoric of America continued to maintain throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries that the public schools were our special instrument of achieving an equitable society. And so it is said today, as it has been said for a century or more, that whatever failures exist in our schools in offering equality of opportunity are failures that can be corrected, and indeed the schools are in the process of solving whatever lapses may exist.

To abandon our rhetoric of equality through education would force us to recognize social and ethnic and racial classes existing in America that are no less than castes. Generation after generation of poverty in a society that measures success in somewhat narrow terms is a failure of our society that we cannot admit. The few exceptions, the child of the ghetto for example who excels in school, who goes off to Princeton on scholarship, who rises to the meritorious heights, only seem to confirm the general state of inopportunity for the many of the ghettos. But even aside from such success stories of school achievement, there is the factor of chance. Luck, it appears, may be a far more potent force than hard work in any individual's opportunity for success. It is John Travolta's character in search of success, not Horatio Alger's, who speaks to the reality of today, or if not the reality then the perception of it by today's young people. Having the right stuff, the right connections, or a certain style may all be factors in the chance of success, but clearly these are not qualities derived from rigorous academic study. Success in areas that schools might develop in young people, such as outstanding athletic ability or artistic talent is perceived by today's young as a matter of the "breaks" which could mean big success or equally big failure, but not the product of ordered, measured achievement. The question is, how can the school respond to a shift in the basis of how success is attained in our society? What sort of revision of our rhetoric of equal opportunity may be needed? It seems clear that we must have the declared intention at least of schools which offer opportunity to all. For the well being of the whole society, for our sense of what is just and fair to all Americans, we must begin to make reality of our claims of equity through education. To forfeit this rhetoric of equality through the schools would destroy our vision of liberty and justice for all. Our vision of what American democracy means demands the American public school.

America the International Influence

Clear enough in the national reports on the faltering state of American education is the threat to our present strength and influence internationally. Implied is a decline in

international status to that of a minor power, a second class nation threatened and controlled militarily from abroad. At risk is the capability of American initiative and inventiveness to come up with the new ideas that can compete successfully in the international world of business and industry. Sophisticated technology has been the basis of American military strength since the Second World War. And this high powered hardware has come out of experimental laboratories and ultimately from scientific theory and more ultimately from the minds of scientists. And where do scientific minds form but in classrooms in schools and colleges across the nation. The connection from here to there, from schoolhouse to missile strength is quite clear. Aside from the merits or demerits, the wisdom or unwisdom or even outright foolhardiness of American policy internationally in recent years, military strength at some level seems essential to maintain. And the schools, as is clear, lie at the source. The young scientific minds of today are the key to American's military capabilities in coming years.

In the 1950's, a very hot period of cold war, much was made by Conant and Rickover and other reformers of American education of that era on this point that the schools are the base for military strength. Instruction in the sciences in the grades where attitudes are first set and young minds are formed was seen as at least as important as high school and college offerings in the sciences. Excellence it was said must begin at the beginning. A further argument pressed by Conant particularly was that the nation could not afford to have young scientific minds go undiscovered and uncultivated, to lose their contribution in the scientific race. In the national interest young minds must not be lost to poor instruction or to the deprivations of the ghetto or in yet another dimension, to girlish dreams of glamor. Students, young men and women, of whatever color, national origin and accent, were seen as a national resource to be focused on America's scientific and military demands. America could not afford city slums because not only were they a threat to the internal order of this scientific developing, they tended to bury good scientific minds in crime and poverty. Schools at all levels it was said needed counselors

to see that talent was identified, tested and brought forward to become the scientific leadership of tomorrow. And so on, with interesting resonances in the current national reports of crisis in education. Children, all children, are seen as a national resource. The next generation must be educated in order to develop the next generation of missiles.

Implied further perhaps in the warnings of school failure is the larger issue of America's influence internationally in support of democratic political and social ideas. That is, our influence in exporting our revolution, our blend of liberty and equality, though muffled perhaps in recent years, is linked to our drive to maintain military strength. The American vision, our view of ourselves, beginning with our own democratic experiment, has been that people everywhere should share the rights and freedom of democratic institutions. In the broad sense this view of ourselves is also at stake in the strength of the nation's schools. In the international arena as at home our rhetoric of justice and equality in our stance as a world power must be brought into closer accord with the reality of our institutions and actions.

At base the risk of failure of the American system of schools involves the political and social well being of our society. We think of ourselves as a just society or at least as striving to attain justice for all citizens. And by extension we want security and strength abroad so that these same ideals can be fostered around the world to the benefit of all. The American design assumes that hard work and merit will be rewarded with the opportunity for advancement for everyone. Each child of course must have access to schooling from the early years on, and it is the schools equally open to all that provide the intellectual and social base for meritorious advancement. A neat design, this, for a just society. It rests on individual initiative, it is framed by democratic political and social institutions, and is built on equity in education. Parts of the design have been very difficult to effect, but the struggle goes on. And even as an imperfect plan, falling well short of the ideal of a just society, the American design has kept the vision before us. Unquestionably moreover it has proved enormously productive.

The Economic Strength of America

An alarming threat in the failure of American education according to the current national reports is the eclipse of American economic and industrial leadership. A part of the American design for a just society is the economic aspect of it: the meritocracy assumes a competition in dedicated work as well as in new ideas that leads to better production and expanding wealth. And American free enterprise has indeed produced wealth over the past century in amazing proportions. The old industrial order that was so remarkably successful in the past however is threatened by changes today with new technologies and new developments toward a "post-industrial" economy. American industry in the international marketplace seems no longer so secure. These shifts in world economic production directly impinge on American schooling, and the implications for change for our schools reach far beyond the warnings of the reports. The economic strength of America dependent as it is on our educational system is indeed at stake.

The American system of capitalist enterprise, the theory of it, encourages free competition of merit and industry to create always the new and better mousetrap. The new, the creative, the efficient are rewarded with success in the marketplace. New technologies, with new ways of thinking are indeed the essential element for the ever expanding production of wealth. Individual citizens who are willing to commit their resources along with their hard work are rewarded by personal wealth and honor. And the economy of the entire nation flourishes. There are more goods produced for more people, and there are ever more people who can afford those goods, and so on.

The success story of American economic enterprise is well celebrated, and rightly so. The ever expanding size of the economic pie in this century has made it possible to spread the wealth to more and more people. The industrial proletariat, the working farmers, all the oppressed of Marxist theory, have managed a goodly piece of the American pie. The amazingly vast production of wealth in fact has been the American answer to critics of the inequities of our capitalist system of enterprise. Of course our

free enterprise system has hardly been "free" in the past any more than it is today. Government has always fostered and regulated, encouraged and controlled at every turn, even bailed out a sure loser in the capitalist competition from time to time. And for those citizens and groups who have managed to get little or no piece of the pie, government has aided and supported them over the years with various social programs. Recently there has been, in Reagan terms, the "safety net," cold comfort for those citizens left out of it entirely.

Equity of course is no small problem in the workings of this system. It is important in the theory of it that every citizen should have the opportunity to play, to win riches and fame in the competition. Schooling that is free and open equally to the children of all citizens is essential to the scheme, essential indeed to our American ideal of a just society. Beyond these concerns of equity, important though they are, is the even more basic concern that young people of talent and ingenuity of each new generation should be developed to the fullest in order that the most able players can emerge as the winners. That is, the free enterprise system depends on the schools to see that out of the mass population of each new generation, that ability is encouraged, that mind and inclination is cultivated to fuel the capitalist competition. The new ideas, the new technologic developments, as well as the new generation of consumers, must come from an effective system of universal education.

As a competitor in the international arena, moreover, American society can afford no avoidable losses of human potential. That is, the best minds of our whole population of young people must be developed in order for the United States to compete successfully in today's international economy. The waste of a mind of course is a matter of equity in our society. But discrimination, whether racial, linguistic, geographic or otherwise, is an economic risk we cannot afford to take. Tomorrow's creative genuis in mathematics may come out of a proper white suburbia, but then she or he could well come from backwoods Appalachia or the Hispanic quarter of Los Angeles or anywhere in between. The world

economic competition is at base intellectual, and America's schools must see that we bring forward our best.

The competition of ideas in the economic sphere today is of course international, no longer limited to new mousetraps for the local market. The Japanese very evidently have the capability for developing some world class traps these days, and the competition that creates that capability, as the national reports are quick to point out, begins in the schools. The ultimate judgement of success or failure in this frame can affect the economic well being of all Americans. The very size of the American pie could well be cut by the failure of American schools to develop the talent for new ideas.

The field of competition itself here at the end of the century is becoming very much more complex than in earlier years. Sober minded usually quite conservative economists are predicting drastic changes in the American economy: the end of American dominance in heavy industry and its replacement with the information industries of tomorrow. From smoke stack to high tech, from big steal to big computer, from assembly line workers to robots along with the technicians to design and program and manage them. The new American economy it is said will be built on sophisticated enterprises that will require levels of education well beyond the clumsy efforts of today's schools. The demands on the schools both to create the intellectual base for the new technologies as well as to educate the new generation of information age employees will require a redesign of schooling. It will require serious, sustained commitment on the part of the whole country, and no doubt a great deal of money, to develop the kinds of schools and the professionals to staff them that American must have to maintain our favored economic position in the world.

The failure of the schools has implications not only in terms of the economy, but in human terms as well. Great numbers of literally unemployable people could well become a permanent under class in American society. The human suffering of perhaps generations of such failed lives would be incalculable. Even today we are close enough to such an eventuality to know the threat: the devastation of families on welfare without hope of

change, the wasting effects of drug-related crime, of poor medical care on mothers and infants, the indignity of poverty for many older people, and so on. A new system of education obviously cannot immediately solve these social problems today, but in thinking on the new economic developments for tomorrow and the new educational designs needed to accompany it, these human costs must be part of the calculation.

The Burden of the Schools

At risk in the decline of America's schools in sum is our leadership in technology and production, our economic prosperity, the loss of military security alroad, and the disintegration of our civil and social order at home. The burden placed on the schools is staggering in that the health and well being of the whole society seems to rest on their success or failure. The failure of our schools will mean the end of our vision of achieving the just society, the end of the ideal of that delicate balance of liberty and equality. We need to examine what a society such as ours means by a standard of excellence in schooling. We need to consider the social ideas that we hold for ourselves, the standard of equity that we have always maintained to be important to our society's well being in relation to our ideas of excellence. We need to look at the complexities of issues and characters that are involved in the search for excellence with equity in our schools. Above all, American Society must stem the tide of our retreat from equity.

This paper is drawn from an extended work by the author titled "Reforming America's Schools: The High Risks of Failure," Teachers College Record 85:2, Winter, 1984.